

[Ab] Sense – Revisiting the one That can not get Away From Oneself

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“...l’homme n’est pas un esprit et un corps, mais un esprit avec un corps, et qui n’accède à la vérité des choses que parce que son corps est comme fiché en elles.”ⁱ

-maurice merleau-ponty

De-specialization vs. Multi-functionality

The catalyst for the work contained herein is a series of philosophical explorations on the human-object relationship undertaken at Université de Montréal and at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro. The germ for our particular line of questioning is credited to two undergraduates, at l’*École de design industriel* at UdeM, Philippe Carreau and Hubert Pelletier. Their undergraduate terminal project was titled “The De-specialization of Objects.”ⁱⁱ Recently, graduate students, in the Product Design concentration at UNCG’s department of Interior Architecture have further developed Carreau and Pelletier’s inroads. The UdeM work was intended as a commentary on over-consumption trends generated by the mass-production of hyper-specialized objects. The recent and current work at UNCG takes aim at design processes for generating de-specialized objects as well as the use of these in everyday life.

The de-specialization of objects, as defined by Carreau and Pelletier, is an experiment in creating situations where “sense” is co-created and open-ended. Carreau and Pelletier claim that “the user’s curiosity, creativity and participation in the end, that will reveal (or not) the potential of these objects.”ⁱⁱⁱ Their theoretical premise for generating situations conducive to playing begins by dividing objects into two categories, de-specialized or multifunctional. The latter can be represented by a Swiss army knife and the former by a generic kitchen knife. The Swiss army knife’s versatility is endowed by its grouping of parts and functions while a sturdy kitchen knife’s protean potential is due to its generic singular form. A kitchen knife has a basic function to cut, but one can also pierce with the tip, crush the flat side and chop various ways. Analogously, a simple plane can serve as a table, bench or shelf.



Monument and Ornament

Parenthetically, this review of student work has spun-off undergoing research into the epistemology of *miniature* monumentality. Historically, edifying monumentality is associated with the great arts of painting, sculpture and architecture. This may be incontestable, however, the ongoing globalization of our occularcentric world, as described by Juhani Pallasmaa,^{iv} might benefit from a phenomenological paradigm that shifts from the macro to the more intimate – one engaging all of the body’s senses. Though this paper is not intended as a theoretical discourse on the thick subject of meaning, it should be evident to the reader that undeniable connections have been made with philosophical phenomenology, hermeneutics and semiotics.^v The simple toilet bowl is a vivid reminder that universal (or global) signification often reverts to pure arbitrariness without its accompanying social convention. “Form follows function”, even when speaking of a product used for one’s daily constitutional is far from universal. To illustrate this point, semilogist Umberto Eco describes a housing project in the South of Italy where newly introduced toilet bowls are used as olive washers. Contextually quite appropriate, since daily constitutionals had always been performed in the “usual place”—the outhouse. If we think of the shiny white porcelain device as the *OW2000* (or the Olive Washer 2000) rather than a toilet bowl, it makes perfect sense. One can imagine a woven basket in the shape of a half-sphere fitting perfectly in the bowl’s receptacle. After rinsing, by pulling the handle once or twice, a gentle tap of the basket against the rim would yield clean olives ready for pressing. A lid is even provided to keep debris and impurities out.

It is in this philosophical spirit that the following investigations have unfolded. The idea is to challenge typological certainties (orthodoxies), in order to redefine the human-object relationship as a participative rather than passive interaction.

J.P.T.



J.P.T. refers to an object resulting from Jacob Tucci's master thesis, *The Despecialization of Objects: A Process Oriented Approach to Designing Interior Objects*.^{vi} The assumption is that hyper-consumption and hyper-specialization are co-conspirators in the degradation of human-object relationships. On the other hand, a *de-specialization* of objects can increase the health of human-object relationships. This investigation identified the generative creative process as the critical moment for avoiding the development of hyper-specialized objects.

Unfortunately, most hyper-specialized objects evolve out of orthodox design methods. Conversely, in order to create a de-specialized object, the design process must become de-specialized. A typical design process consists of a series of developmental phases: Analysis, Conceptualization, Testing, and Implementation. During the design process, these phases often unfold in a linear manner and are in constant flux as the designer strives to achieve a final solution (the object). The analysis phase identifies the investigation methodology of the design problem and the development of specific design criteria. The criteria usually consist of physical, psychological and task oriented needs, as well as desired secondary functions (such as choosing certain aesthetics that communicates that the user is "hip" or contemporary). With these functions in mind, the designer seeks to develop forms that fulfill them. This method of giving priority to function can be called the "form following function" approach.

When form becomes the primary "restraint", by de-emphasizing function, the process becomes a sculptural endeavor. Due to the over-saturation of seating design, furniture designers approach chair design this way. Though the approach of "form first" has led to beautiful objects, many times functional opportunities have been ignored resulting in objects too aesthetically specific to engender long-term use.

Because designer "intent" (formal and functional objectives) dictates product outcome, "intent" must be suspended to increase the odds of creating a de-specialized object. The generative process to suspend "intent" is dubbed the serendipitous generative process. The **serendipitous generative design process** began with no functional or formal intent,

but relied on the wandering of the design hand. Thus, from the beginning and throughout the generative process, there were effectively no design parameters, such as: functions, shapes, dimensions, scale, materials, finishes, etc. However, in order to manage the numerous possibilities, **the entrepreneur's office** was chosen as a quasi-arbitrary context.

In the beginning, while developing the method, it became clear that a filtering system would be necessary to narrow the field of iterations created. Rather than purge ideations early, as orthodox methods usually prescribe, filters (intents) are applied late in the process, once *de-specialized* ideas have surfaced. Once several generic forms have been conceived, ideas are manipulated to accommodate basic or functional demands. The filters/demands were called *qualifiers*. The qualifiers were divided into three *zones*; spacers, workers, and comforters. Each *zone* represents a family of objects, based on function and according to how they are used in a space. “Workers” address utilitarian-oriented functions, “comforters” address leisure functions (in terms of the five senses) and “spacers” perform space-defining functions. A spacer may occur above, below, on the floor and can reshape an interior space without dividing it. It was not known, earlier-on, at what point the qualifiers would be used or how they would be applied. The given was that filters would help narrow and possibly refine selected ideas.

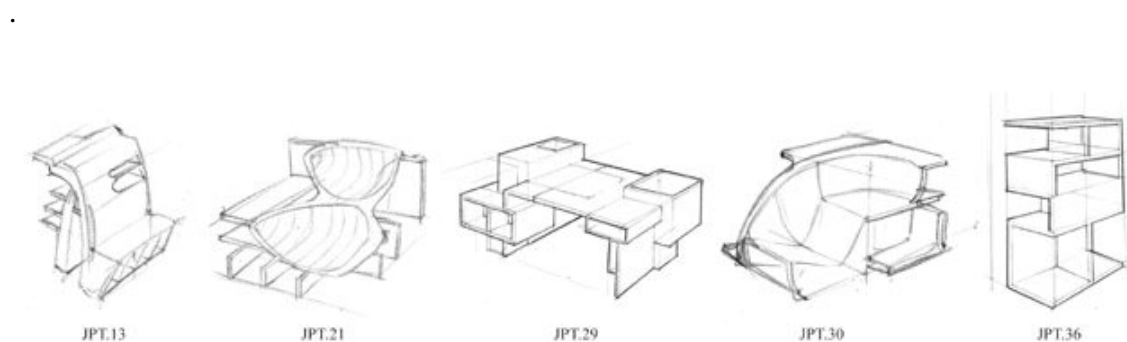
In order to temporarily disconnect from ideas produced and to avoid typical archetypes, visual separation was required. The first series of ideations were produced using blind drawing. The result is a generic abstract form. After much practice, mental separation could be achieved without the visual separation of using blind drawing. Following the “blind drawings”, many other sketches were executed to expand on some of the promising ideations. The result of which was approximately 130 images.

At this point, it was reasonable to apply the ideations to the qualifiers. A matrix was used to analyze and compare 45 ideas that demonstrated the most potential. The matrix offered a means for the designer to step back from the development phase and to evaluate the “production”. The three characteristics evaluated were: formal language types, qualifier alignment and immediate object association. For comparison sake, “formal language types” was used because of the emergence of formal trends in the sketches. The following examples of formal language types were based on how objects appeared to have been physically created; not manufactured, but rather conceptually sculptured:

1. Melted Mass: amorphous shape that appears melted under its own weight.
2. Molded Cast: resembles the look of a cast iron or aluminum part.
3. Shell: thin hollow remains of a form.
4. Three Axis Geometric Extrusion: geometric form extruded along the three Cartesian coordinates, x, y, and z.
5. Geometric Interruption: a geometric form that has been intersected and or interrupted by a curvilinear form.
6. Ribbon: form created from a continuous line or plane that changes directionally.

Each object was assigned a “qualifier alignment” value of between 1 and 5 (1 = least evident and 5 = most evident). Qualifier alignments describe how much, or little, an object fulfills the characteristics of each of the three qualifiers. The category of immediately recognizable object was added to avoid familiar objects types.

The objects were presumed to have the most potential when having a high score for at least one of the qualifiers as well as a score of between 2 and 3 for immediate association. The total qualifier alignment score was also considered. Generally, the higher the total score, the more “functional” potential the object was presumed to have. A score of 1 for immediate association was not as desirable because the object must contain some degree of signifier association, as Umberto Eco suggests.^{vii} A user could then have cues in terms of how an object is used. The five ideas with the most functional potential and, as equally important, the five that depicted the theory of de-specialization the best, were selected. After further filtration of the “top five”, JPT.21 was chosen as the de-specialization subject for this thesis. The geometrically interrupted form possessed many functional opportunities and was formally intriguing. Several model variations of JPT.21 were built, which lead to a refined prototype.



The wager is that when JPT.21 no longer serves a functional need, it can be reoriented to suit a new one or it can be passed on to a new user. This would serve in avoiding the inflation of its use value and ultimately its early demise and retirement.

The advantage of inexhaustible iterations does present potential disadvantages. When the objective is to create one product, hundreds of ideas, varying drastically in form, can generate a loss of focus and draw the process out longer than necessary. Moreover, the serendipitous method described herein implies the inescapability of one’s own experiences, expectations, desires, preferences and body of knowledge. Designing *de-specialized* objects requires a balance between escaping one’s self and embracing one’s self.

Unscripted Actions: Design Interaction Between Child and Product



Flippy is the nickname for Tiffany Stewart's prototype and thesis in product design at UNCG's Interior Architecture graduate program. Her thesis, *Unscripted Actions: Design Interaction Between Child and Product*^{viii} was successfully defended in May of 2008. The crux of her work was to propose and test interactive blocks for children from 3 to 5. Though the creative process was not part of the research's scope, clearly a similar serendipitous generative approach was employed. The end objective was to provide a loose structure that allows children to define "play" and manipulate their own environment. The catalyst for this inquiry was : "Do children need a scaled kitchen set to play *kitchen*?" The hypothetical answer was no, adult iconic furnishings actually limit children's exploration and imagination. The design intent was to develop objects scaled for children, while not emulating iconic forms. In other words, generating de-specialized objects for children. The context for this work was the childcare environment.

The generative design process began with shape exploration in clay. Many of the initial iterations were too amorphous and not conducive to being manipulated by children. The following generation was explored using rigid foam and digital modeling. Two paths emerged from this exploration. The first was puzzle-like shapes that interlocked and the second, strategically hinged cube-like objects. The latter was pursued for prototyping and testing.

A modified version of Flippy was tested in an on-campus preschool class for three days. The modified design ensemble had it hinges removed and the size of its components size scaled-down 25 percent. The 18" objects were easier for small children to manipulate. Though the hinges engendered interesting interactions at first, by initially connecting the pieces together, a concern arose that the children's decisions were being scripted and thus limiting freedom of play. *Flippy Unhinged* energized the children's play. During three days the children, without adult assistance, assembled the blocs in familiar and unfamiliar configurations. They created, "race cars", "hot tubs", "houses", spaces, environments for toys (such as animals), obstacle courses, seating, and unforeseen sculptural forms. On the third day the children were allowed to incorporate other objects from the classroom, such as wooden blocks. The introduction of alien objects/toys seemed to have increased the flexibility of *Flippy*. *Flippy Unhinged* is slated for production and distribution.

Miniature Monumentality

The pursuit of “singular” or de-specialized objects implies that tectonic artifacts may hold significance without constructs made of linguistically charged signification. Jean Baudrillard, in *Les Objects Singuliers*, intimates this by asking the architect Jean Nouvel multiple times: “*Est-ce qu’il y a une vérité de l’architecture?*”^{ix}



In the work described above, *truth* is explored in more intimate architectonic objects. By juxtaposing Ronchamp to LeCorbusier’s LC2 chair we are not claiming that “ceci tuera cela”, only that intimate architectonic objects hold value in significant edification. An intimate monumentality not derived from a perceived sense of a permanent physical truth, as is often the case with larger architectural artifacts and their representation. In the genesis and reception of de-specialized objects, veiled objectivity is superseded by inter-subjectivity via the hermeneutic certainty that “one can never get away from oneself”. In a global world—where quasi-instant and hyper-real representation of everything is readily available—the thing-in-itself gains certain legitimacy. The play-beckoning *Litho Chair* (a piece from the Carreau and Pelletier collection), *J.P.T. 21* and *Flippy* speak of a meaning that is not imbedded upfront or even intentional—it is co-created.

NOTES

ⁱ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Causeries* 1948. Transcribed by St  phanie M  nas   (Paris: Seuil, 2002) 23. Quote translated by R.M. Charest: “man is not a spirit and a body, but a spirit with a body, and who accedes to the truth of things only because his body is like intertwined in them.” *Causeries* 1948 is a series of seven lectures, by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, broadcasted on the radio by *Radiodiffusion fran  aise* (RDF) and later transcribed.

ⁱⁱ Carreau, Philippe and Pelletier, Hubert. “The De-specialization of objects.” *Platform The University of Texas at Austin School of Architecture Journal*. Austin: The University of Texas at Austin School of Architecture, 2004: 16-17.

ⁱⁱⁱ *ibid.*

^{iv} Pallasmaa, Juhani. "The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses." *Polemics*. London: Academy Editions, 1996.

^v The authors are looking specifically towards Hans-Georg Gadamer, Gianni Vattimo, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Umberto Eco.

^{vi} Tucci, Jacob (2006). *The Despecialization of Objects: a process oriented approach to designing interior objects*.

^{vii} Eco, Umberto. (1997). *Function and Sign: the Semiotics of Architecture*. In Leach, Neil (Eds.), *Rethinking Architecture* (pp. 182-202). London: Routledge.

^{viii} Stewart, Tiffany (2008). *Unscripted Actions: Designing for Product Interaction through a Preschool Play System*.

^{ix} Baudrillard, Jean and Nouvel, Jean. "Les Objets Singuliers." France: Calmann-Levy, 2001.